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FOR THE SECRETARY FROM THE AMBASSADOR

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/19/2018  
TAGS: PGOV PREL GG RU  
SUBJECT: GEORGIA: YOUR MEETING WITH PRESIDENT SAAKASHVILI  
AT UNGA

REF: TBILISI 1602

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) AND (d).

¶1. (C) In your meeting with President Saakashvili on the margins of the UN General Assembly you will find a leader who is newly focused on the concept of strategic patience. He is circling his wagons around several key objectives: reconstruction of damaged infrastructure and Georgia's economy; maintenance of public support and confidence in him and his government; avoidance of any actions that would lead to long-term negative consequences for conflict resolution in a way that would threaten Georgia's territorial integrity; and accession to NATO. He and his key ministers have told me and Matt Bryza that they will wait out the current crisis in order to find constructive ways to insure Georgia's territorial integrity.

¶2. (C) Saakashvili told us on September 14 that he preferred to be patient in view of Russia's current dominant negotiating position. He wanted to make sure that Georgia, in its haste to end the conflict, did not make commitments that would endanger territorial integrity in the future (as he believes Shevardnadze did by signing the infamous Moscow agreement on Abkhazia in 1994). Saakashvili predicted that the political situation in Russia would change and that Georgia was prepared if necessary to wait for a more favorable climate. In your meeting, you can encourage this new-found patience for resolving the conflicts with a strong commitment of continued U.S. and European support for Georgia and its territorial integrity.

¶3. (C) One of the areas on which we need to continue to press President Saakashvili is making progress on deepening and institutionalizing democratic reform. This will help with NATO, while warding off potential Russian efforts to undermine his regime. In his September 14 State of the Country address to Parliament, he committed to launch a new wave of reforms (reftel): strengthening Parliament, establishing free and impartial media, promoting free and unbiased courts, limiting executive powers, and protecting private property. Saakashvili made a good point in his speech that in the face of crisis, he wanted to broaden and deepen Georgian democracy, not tighten up in the name of security. It is important that he follow through on these permanent real adjustments to enhance Georgia's democracy. If he does, he can both impress the Europeans as well as reassure his American supporters that he remains a true democrat.

¶4. (C) Saakashvili's political opponents here have become increasingly vocal in calling for an accounting of his actions during the war. Some are already calling for his resignation and new elections. Although they are well-covered in the press, the opposition continues to be divided and without much of a common program beyond disliking

Saakashvili. Recent polling by a reputable U.S. company supports the view that Saakashvili and his Government continue to be popular in Georgian society as a whole -- although key Saakashvili advisors have confided that they know this popularity could be short-lived this winter if he does not focus on domestic political and economic issues now.

While Russian troops remain in the country, Saakashvili will continue to be strong politically. Georgian popular hatred of Russians continues to dominate the political scene here.

¶ 15. (C) The biggest challenge that you may face in your meeting with President Saakashvili will be to keep him on track for the October 15 meeting in Geneva. Matt and I told Saakashvili that the assistance Georgia needs - both economic and in moving closer to NATO - will depend on reassuring key policymakers in Europe that Georgia is working in good faith on the issues relevant to the conflicts. The Foreign Minister told us that Georgia had no expectation that the Geneva talks would lead anywhere, but Georgia needs to ensure the processes developed in the talks will lead ultimately to Georgia's long-term survival. After coming close to losing all of the gains made since the Rose Revolution, the Georgian leadership understands the existential threat it faces from Russia.

¶ 16. (C) During the meeting, Saakashvili will seek from you assurances that the United States will take the lead on developing penalties for those conducting business in either South Ossetia or Abkhazia - something that we are working on with the Georgian authorities. You will want to encourage Georgia not to jeopardize its NATO aspirations by appearing to be obstructionist in Geneva -- he needs to understand that the international community will support Georgia as long as

it plays a constructive role. The United States will not urge Georgia to sign an agreement prematurely. We need to work together closely to keep the separatists isolated and to shine a spotlight on Russian efforts to undermine Georgia's territorial integrity permanently.

¶ 17. (C) Georgia is arguing now that Russia is unwilling either to protect human rights or to allow the investigation of possible serious crimes in the conflict zones as well as in the occupied territories in Georgia proper behind Russian checkpoints. During his visit to Tbilisi, Matt and I discussed with senior Georgian officials a strategy of pushing for the protection of human rights in the territories, including those of IDPs - and the introduction of new international (non-Russian) peacekeepers to do it. Although Russia will balk, the Europeans will not question the importance of protecting human rights. If Saakashvili is completely forthcoming in cooperating with human rights investigators - even if they uncover some problems on the Georgian side - that openness could further isolate Russia and keep Europe squarely behind Georgia's future and territorial integrity.

TEFFT